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New report credits Soviets with leap in warhead count

By Bill Gertz
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The White House is preparing to release an unclassified version of a national intelligence estimate, possibly in a Senate hearing requested for today, which shows a dramatic jump in Soviet ballistic missile warhead levels, an administration defense expert said.

Yesterday, Sen. James McClure, R-Idaho, requested an "urgent" joint hearing with the Senate Armed Services and Appropriations subcommittee on defense to make public the key findings of the study.

The national intelligence estimate was the subject of a letter from Sens. McClure, Jesse Helms, R-N.C., and John East, R-N.C. to President Reagan last week. The senators charged

that information in the estimate shows "the evolving [U.S.-Soviet] military imbalance."

Sen. McClure, in a letter to Appropriations defense subcommittee Chairman Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, said the White House National Security Council informed him that some findings of the estimate are ready to be released and asked him to request the hearing. The letter was also sent to Armed Services Committee Chairman Barry Goldwater, R-Ariz.

A National Security Council spokesman could not be reached for comment.

"This year's National Intelligence Estimate confirms Soviet military supremacy," Sen. McClure wrote in the letter.

A spokesman for Sen. Stevens said the request had been received and

aides were attempting to schedule a hearing for today.

According to the administration expert who spoke on the condition he remain anonymous, one finding of the new report shows that warhead levels for Soviet ballistic missiles now total 11,500 warheads.

The new figure represents an increase in some 2,000 missile warheads from figures published two months ago in the Pentagon's annual assessment of Soviet missile warheads. The figures do not include warheads delivered on strategic bombers.

Soviet deployments of the new SS-24 and SS-25 ICBMs account for the increase, the official said. The new estimate, he said, indicates that the Soviet Union has begun deployment of approximately 200 mobile

SS-25 ICBMs and 100 large SS-24 missiles configured on railroad track launchers.

Besides the new ICBMs, the increase in missile warheads is also attributed to an additional number of warheads on the SS-18 ICBM, the largest missile in the Soviet arsenal. Each SS-18 was thought to carry 10 warheads, but is now estimated to hold 14.

The Soviet deployments contrast sharply with the U.S. missile modernization program. The original proposal to deploy 200 MX missiles, a counterpart to the SS-24, has been cut to 50 by Congress. The only mobile U.S. missile is the single warhead Midgetman mobile ICBM, which is being researched.

Previous reports on the intelligence estimate said up to 20 bases

for the SS-25s were sighted by U.S. intelligence. Each base contains nine garage-like buildings with sliding roofs.

The bases are expected to eventually hold 10 missiles each, with one ICBM constantly moving and the rest in buildings, the official said.

The new estimate indicates that 18 mobile SS-25s currently are deployed and operational, the official said.

The new estimate will also disclose that the Soviets have completed testing of the SS-24 and have moved the missile into its deployment phase, the official said.

Intelligence experts, for the first time, have sighted an operational SS-24 under heavy camouflage on a rail launcher at the Strategic Rocket Forces complex at Kostroma, he said.